

# Prairie Chicken Hunt Longtime Coming

Story and Photos By Ron Wilson

The significance of being part of a small collection of hunters chasing prairie chickens in North Dakota for the first time in nearly six decades was not lost on the participants.

"I feel extremely lucky just to be out here and to be one of the first to do this after so many years," said Neil Shook of Devils Lake. "The idea that you're hunting a bird our ancestors hunted is thrilling."

The state held its first hunting season since 1945 for prairie chickens, or pinnated grouse, October 9-17 in two hunting zones in Grand Forks County and southeast North Dakota. The season was dubbed as an experimental prairie grouse season as both sharp-tailed grouse and prairie chickens – similar looking birds to the average hunter – were fair game.



More than 530 hunters applied for 100 permits made available for the hunt.

With one prairie chicken in the bag before noon on opening day, Shook and Sheyenne, his Chesapeake Bay retriever, waded through a mixture of grasses north of Mekinock, in Grand Forks County, looking for their limit. "It happened so quickly," he said of shooting his first bird. "When it flushed, I saw that it was a (pinnated) grouse and I shot. I feel extremely lucky."

State Game and Fish Department personnel checked 18 hunters opening weekend in the Grand Forks County area, according to Jerry Kobriger, Department upland game management supervisor in Dickinson. Eighteen birds were harvested on or around the Department's Prairie Chicken Wildlife Management Area.

Brothers Alex and Aaron Van Ningen, Moffit, ate up some miles – and a number of shotgun shells, they joked – in their quest for birds that arrived in North Dakota on the heels of settlers in the late 1880s before nearly passing into obscurity decades later. "It was a blast ... not like any hunting we've ever done before," Aaron said.

The Van Ningen, led by their dad, Paul, shot four of the nonnative birds in Grand Forks County and saw about 30 on the wing. "I never thought we'd see the day we could hunt prairie chickens in North Dakota," the eldest Van Ningen said. "What an awesome opportunity."

In southeast North Dakota, mostly the Sheyenne Grasslands, hunters didn't have as good of luck opening weekend, said Stan Kohn, Department upland game management biologist. "I checked only about nine people – and only one harvested a prairie chicken – but I know that I missed some folks as it's a bigger (hunting) area than around Grand Forks County," he said. "People



*For the first time in decades, prairie chickens were fair game again in parts of North Dakota.*

were seeing some chickens mixed in with sharptails, but they were being cautious because they wanted to shoot a prairie chicken."

About 20 years ago, only the Sheyenne Grasslands could claim anything near a substantial pinnated grouse population. By 1980, the birds had vanished from the Mekinock area northwest of Grand Forks. Part of an effort to re-establish birds in Grand Forks County entailed bringing in grouse from elsewhere – Minnesota, South Dakota and Nebraska – starting in 1992. John Toepfer, prairie chicken expert and researcher from Wisconsin, was in on the first release in North Dakota, and was on hand for opening weekend of the first hunt in decades.

"The goal from the start was to establish a huntable prairie chicken population," Toepfer said. "I didn't know if it was possible at the time, but here we are."

**RON WILSON** is editor of *North Dakota OUTDOORS*.

*John Toepfer (seated), prairie chicken researcher from Wisconsin, and Jerry Kobriger, Department upland game biologist, inspect and record data from a prairie chicken shot in Grand Forks County.*